# How to Write an Essay: 10 Easy Steps

## by Tom Johnson

*How vain it is to sit down to write when you have not stood up to live.*
*-- Henry David Thoreau*

**Why is writing an essay so frustrating?**

Learning how to write an essay can be a maddening, exasperating process, but it doesn't have to be. If you know the steps and understand what to do, writing can be easy and even fun.

This small ebook, "How To Write an Essay: 10 Easy Steps," offers a ten-step process that teaches students how to write an essay. Links to the writing steps are found on the left, and additional writing resources are located across the top.

*Learning how to write an essay doesn't have to involve so much trial and error.*



## Step 1: Research

Assuming you've been given a topic, or have narrowed it sufficiently down, your first task is to research this topic. You will not be able to write intelligently about a topic you know nothing about. To discover worthwhile insights, you'll have to do some patient reading.

**Read light sources, then thorough**

When you conduct research, move from light to thorough resources to make sure you're moving in the right direction. Begin by doing searches on the Internet about your topic to familiarize yourself with the basic issues; then move to more thorough research on the Academic Databases; finally, probe the depths of the issue by burying yourself in the library. Make sure that despite beginning on the Internet, you don't simply end there. A research paper using only Internet sources is a weak paper, and puts you at a disadvantage for not utilizing better information from more academic sources.

**Write down quotations**

As you read about your topic, keep a piece of paper and pen handy to write down interesting quotations you find. Make sure you write down the source and transcribe quotations accurately. I recommend handwriting the quotations to ensure that you don't overuse them, because if you have to handwrite the quotations, you'll probably only use quotations sparingly, as you should. On the other hand, if you're cruising through the net, you may just want to cut and paste snippets here and there *along with their URLs* into a Word file, and then later go back and sift the kernels from the chaff.

With print sources, you might put a checkmark beside interesting passages. Write questions or other thoughts in the margins as well. If it's a library book, use post-it notes to avoid ruining the book. Whatever your system, be sure to annotate the text you read. If reading online, see if you can download the document, and then use Word's Reviewing toolbar to add notes or the highlighter tool to highlight key passages.

**Take a little from a lot**

You'll need to read widely in order to gather sources on your topic. As you integrate research, take a little from a lot -- that is, quote briefly from a wide variety of sources. This is the best advice there is about researching. Too many quotations from one source, however reliable the source, will make your essay seem unoriginal and borrowed. Too few sources and you may come off sounding inexperienced. When you have a lot of small quotations from numerous sources, you will seem -- if not be -- well-read, knowledgeable, and credible as you write about your topic.

## Step 1a: Researching on the Internet

While the Internet should never be your only source of information, it would be ridiculous not to utlize its vast sources of information. You should use the Internet to acquaint yourself with the topic more before you dig into more academic texts. When you search online, remember a few basics:

### Use a variety of search engines

The Internet contains some 550 billion web pages. Google is a powerful search engine, but it only reaches about 5 billion of those pages -- less than one percent! When you search the Internet, you should use a handful of different search engines. The Academic Search Engines above (collected mostly from Paula Dragutsky's Searchability) specialize in delivering material more suitable for college purposes, while the Popular Search Engines help locate information on less academic topics. Whatever your topic, use a *variety* of search engines from both menus. Once you go beyond Google, you will begin to realize the limitlessness horizons of the Internet. For example, a searchstring on www.wisenut.com results in hits different from www.turbo10.com, which also results in different hits on www.google.com and www.overture.com. Try it!

### Look at the Site's Quality

With all the returns from your searches, you'll doubtless pull in a bundle of sites, and like a fisherman on a boat, your job will be to sort through the trash. The degree of professional design and presentation of a site should speak somewhat towards the content. Sites with black backgrounds are usually entertainment sites, while those with white backgrounds are more information based. Sites with colorful and garish backgrounds are probably made by novice designers. Avoid blog pages (online journals). Avoid "free-essay" pages. Avoid pages where there are multiple applets flashing on the screen. Also pay attention to the domain types. You should know that:

- .com = commercial
- .org = organization
- .gov = government
- .edu = education
- .net = network

The domain type indicates a possible bias toward the information. Obviously an .org site on animal rights is going to be a bit slanted towards one side of the issue. And if the sites try to sell you something, like many of the "sponsored listings" that appear on the top of the hits list with search engines, avoid them.

### Mix up your search words

If you're getting too many hits, enter more keywords in the search box. If you aren't getting enough hits, enter fewer keywords in the searchbox. Also try inputting the same concept but in different words and phrases. Overture has a keyword search suggestion tool that lets you know what the most popular search strings are for the concept you're searching for. *Search Engine Watch* also has a useful tutorial on how to enter search strings, explaining how to add + and - and quotation marks to get more accurate results.

Many search engines have advanced tabs that help you search with more detail. Google, for example, has an advanced search option that greatly increases accuracy of returns, though few use it. Finally, know that

some search engines specialize in specific types of content, so if you don't have much success with one search engine, try another.

**Don't Limit Yourself to the Internet**

While it's fun to surf the net and discover new sites with information relevant to your topic, don't limit yourself to the Internet. By and large the Internet, because it is a medium open to publication by all, can contain some pretty sketchy information. If your essay is backed by research from "Steve and Kim's homepage," "Matt's Econ Blog," and "teenstuffonline," your essay won't be as convincing as it would be with more academic journals. Academic journals and books have better research, more thorough treatment of the topics, a more stable existence (they'll still be there in a 10 years), and ultimately more persuasive power. Don't substitute Eddy Smith's "Summer Vacation to the Middle East" for Edward Said's *Orientalism.*

### Step 1b: Researching the Academic Databases

**The Academic Databases**

Almost every college subscribes to a list of academic databases where more specialized, academic essays can be found. If you are an AUC student, go to the AUC Library Homepage and choose **Electronic Resources** to survey the 80+ academic databases that AUC subscribes to. Each of these databases specializes in a different kind of information. For a writing class exploring general research topics, the following four indexes are probably the most useful:

### Academic Search Premier

Academic Search Premier is the most popular student database, and the most costly for schools. It is one of a handful of databases on EBSCO Host. After selecting Academic Search Premier, you will see a screen allowing you to specify more databases within EBSCO Host. Depending upon your topic, you may also want to check some of these boxes. On the search query screen on Academic Search Premier, you can control the kind of return hits your search retrieves.

On the Advanced Search tab, you can also search for keywords within a specific publication. This would be helpful if you knew a good journal or magazine, but were unsure of when an article was published on the topic in it.

## CQ Researcher

*CQ Researcher* is a bit different than other journals. Every two weeks a new issue dedicated solely to one hot, current issue is published. One or two researchers produce all the content, and the articles are mainly informational rather than argumentative, giving readers an overview of the issue, of pro/con debates, a history, a bibliography of sources, and so on. *CQ Researcher's* bibliography is a great source for finding more sources -- you can plug some of the titles into other academic databases or even the Internet itself and often find the source. Because *CQ Researcher* is single-authored, you should careful that you do not overquote from it.



To cite a source from *CQ Researcher*, click on the nifty CiteNow! link on the top toolbar of the article and select MLA style.

## JSTOR

A more academic journal, *JSTOR* has its articles stored as .pdf files. These .pds files can sometimes be large and therefore take a long time to download. However, all articles within the *JSTOR* database are quality academic articles, some perhaps beyond the scope of what you're looking for. To read a .pdf file you must have Adobe Acrobat reader, which you can download for free if your computer doesn't already have it. Before you search on *JSTOR*, you must first select which journals you want to search in.
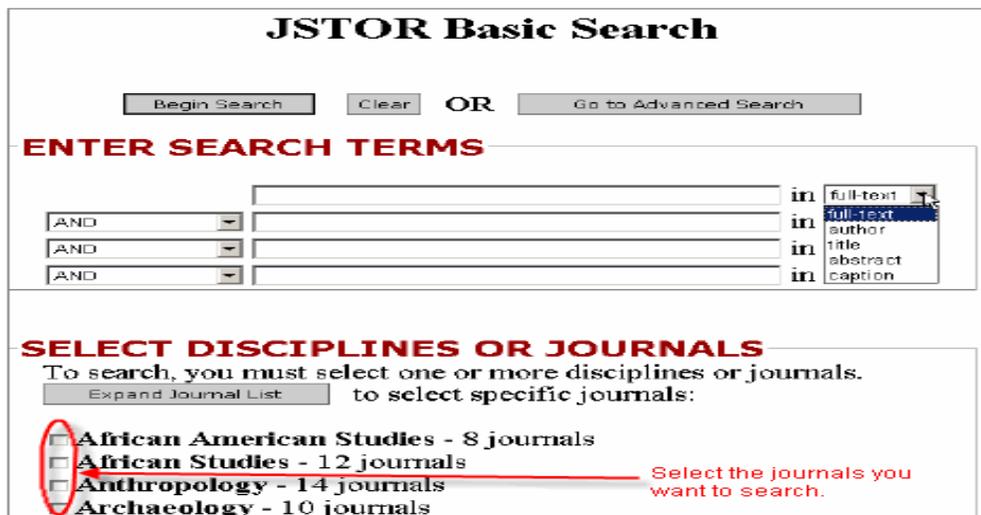
The most common complaint students have about JSTOR is that the essays are too long and difficult to read. In fact, reading from JSTOR in contrast to the Internet will give you a good feel for the difference between academic and non-academic sources. When you use a source from JSTOR in your essay, your essay will be much more credible and scholarly.
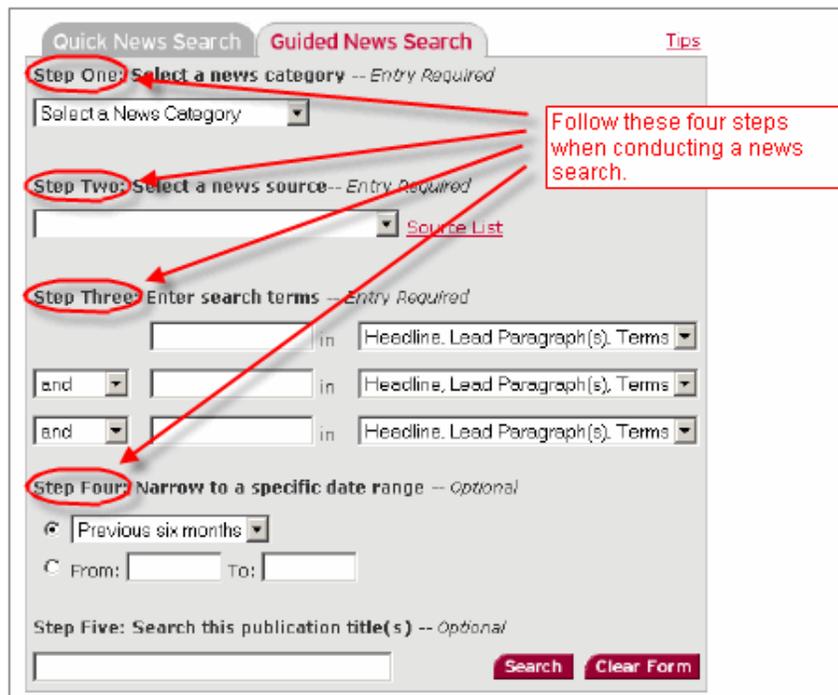
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## LEXIS-NEXIS Academic Universe

If you're looking for **news** articles, LEXIS-NEXIS is the database to search. Keep in mind, though, that news articles aren't usually scholarly articles; they mostly give current information about topics. Some of the longer articles on LEXIS-NEXIS may be more scholarly. You just have to judge by the depth and research in the essay. The LEXIS-NEXIS database seems to contain almost every newspaper in the world. Hence specifying the search queries to get the returns you want can be a bit more complicated than usual.

First, select guided **Guided News Search.**



In the Guided News Search tab (rather than the "Quick News Search" tab) follow the four steps for making a more specific selection. Doing so will yield much better results than simply typing in general keywords into the Quick News Search.



 Troubleshooting

If you're having trouble finding information on one database, try another. Mix up your keywords or use different ones. If you get too many hits, try searching with more specific keywords. If you don't get enough hits, search with a broader set of keywords, or even just one keyword.

Finally, remember that you are not limited to these four databases. There are dozens more that the library subscribes to. Scan down the list and see if any others might be useful. These five are perhaps worth checking out:

- ERIC (EBSCOHost)
- Oxford English Dictionary
- Project Muse
- Sociological Abstracts
- WorldCat

## Step 1c: Researching in the Library

A common misconception among students is that the library is full of old, out-of-date, musty books -- probably none from this century -- and therefore any books found there would be so out of step with the current discussion on the topic that the books, and any effort to retrieve them, would be utterly useless.

Fortunately, all libraries have *acquisitions* departments with specialists from different fields of scholarship who constantly order up-to-date books on the contemporary issues in almost all fields. As a result, most libraries have books on all issues at least within the last ten years or so. So unless you're writing about something totally new, chances are a book has been written on it, and most likely that book is waiting for you in the library.

### Retrieving books saves energy

Another misconception many students have is that even if they were to see a book listed on the electronic catalogs, it would be too much of a hassle to physically go to the library, hike the stairs, take elevators perhaps, wander among the stacks and corridors, skim through eternal Library of Congress call numbers, and so on.

While it is true that the physical exertion required (i.e., walking) to find the book is more than that required to click a mouse, once you find the book, it requires less energy to progress through the information than it does to fight the endless screens, non-linear progressions, and specious content on the Internet. In contrast, books are well-organized, logically progressive texts that usually contain abundant research, are written by scholars, and will provide excellent evidence for your essay.

The Internet is full of everything from porno to CIA reports, and it's all jumbled together like paint splattered on a wall. You'll have to sort through it like a homeless man foraging for food in a dumpster. Think about how nice it would be instead to read a chapter from a book while lying in bed.

### Learn to skim books

Because books are so thorough and long (it may have taken the author years to write it, as opposed to an online article, which might have been written in under an hour), you have to learn to skim. Skim the table of contents to see if there is a chapter that is relevant. Read the introduction and the first pages of several chapters to see if the information is really what you're looking for.

Since you will still need to cite from a variety of sources, don't spend too long immersed in the same book. Take a little information from a lot of different books -- from an author here, an author there. It might be a good idea to photocopy the necessary pages rather than cart around a backpack full of books.

### Library as sanctuary

The more you spend time researching in the library, the more you will come to see what a sanctuary the library can be. The loud, noisy traffic of the streets outside is blocked out as you sit comfortably surrounded by thousands of insightful books on important topics throughout the ages. A library can be a sanctuary to you -- a place to study, a place to escape your friends or other obligations, a refuge of peace and quiet. A good library is the heart of any academic institution, and the more time you spend in it, the more it will feel like hallowed ground. One student at New York University even decided to sleep permanently in his university's library (only superficially for financial reasons).

# Step 2: Analysis

As you research your topic, you will naturally be analyzing the arguments of different authors. In contrast to more popular reading, in the academic world, authors must supply copious amounts of evidence and nuanced reasoning in order persuade other scholars of their ideas. To enter the scholar's "gladiator arena," you will need to understand the principles of argument. Both analyzing an argument and coming up with your own will require careful thought.

## Identify the argument

An argument consists of two main components: a claim, and reasons for that claim. Neither a claim without reasons, nor reasons without a claim, is an argument. Only when one leverages particular reasons to make a claim from those reasons do we say that an "argument" is taking place.

When analyzing an argument of any text, or creating one of your own, first identify the main claim and then locate all the reasons for it. The claim is the controversial, debatable assertion of the essay, while the reasons offer the explanations and evidence of why the claim is true. It is helpful to map this reasoning out:

CLAIM = _____

- Reason 1: _____
- Reason 2: _____
- Reason 3: _____

## Assess the reasoning

Once you have the argument mapped out, assess the reasoning. Ask yourself the following questions to help you identify weaknesses of logic:

(1.) Is there an alternative explanation that is possible? An *alternative explanation i*s a different reason for the same claim. Probing the alternative explanations or reasons for a claim is an excellent way to open up weaknesses in the author's logic.

- Example: "John was late because he obviously doesn't care about the class." (An alternative explanation for John's lateness could be that he got in a car wreck, and therefore couldn't make it on time to class, not that he doesn't care about it.)

(2.) Is the evidence presented sufficient? *Evidence* refers to the support given for a claim. This support may be in the form of facts, statistics, authoritative quotations, studies, observations, experiences, research, or other forms of proof.

- Example: "John was late because he has Alzheimer's disease, and according to the *American Medical Association,* Alzheimer's patients frequently forgot who and where they are" (Jones 65). (The writer has given evidence in the form of research for his or her reasoning.)

(3.) What assumptions do the reasons rest on? An assumption is what one takes for granted to be true, but which actually may not be true. All arguments rest on some common assumptions. This common ground makes it possible for two people to have a dialogue in the first place, but these assumptions, because they are based on groundless ideas, make for a "sweet spot" of attack in argument.

- Example: "John was late because his previous class is on the far side of campus." (The assumption is that it takes a long time to get from the far side of campus to class. If John walked the same speed as the one presenting the argument, the assumption would be a shared one. However, it may be the case that John actually walks much faster than assumed, and that he was late for another reason.)

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(4.) Does the writer commit any logical fallacies? Fallacies are commonly committed errors of reasoning. Being aware of these fallacies will help you see them more abundantly in the texts you read. Although there are probably at least a hundred different fallacies, the following six are the most common:

**Either/Or:** Narrowing the options to just two extremes when in actuality more options exist.

o        **Example:** Either John was late because he forgot where the class was, or because he didn't want to come. (Actually, John may have been late for another reason not listed here. Maybe he fell down a manhole.)

o        **Example:** Either spend the entire night proofreading your paper or you will get an F in the course. (Actually, you might ask the teacher for a one day extension so that you don't have to kill yourself with an all-nighter. The point is that there aren't just two options.)

**Non Sequitar**: The conclusion/claim doesn't follow from the reasons.

o        **Example:** I saw John talking to a pretty girl this morning. Therefore, he is late to class because he's probably eating lunch with her. (It doesn't follow that talking to a pretty girl would lead to a truant luncheon.)

o        **Example:** Some cars drive recklessly along the roads where pedestrians walk, endangering them. Therefore, we should ban pedestrians from walking down some roads. (It doesn't follow that you should punish the pedestrians instead of the cars.)

**Slippery Slope**: Exaggerating the consequences.

o        **Example:** If John is late to class, he'll miss the material and do poorly on the test. When his father sees his bad grades, John will be whipped and then he'll run away and join the circus. (Actually, John may do fine on the test even though he missed class.)

o        **Example:** Students who arrive late to class will receive low grades, which will then prevent them from declaring their majors. If students can't declare the majors they want, they'll lead miserable lives fulfilling careers they hate until they finally commit suicide. (Actually, even if students receive a low grade, it doesn't mean they won't be able to bring up their other grades in other classes and still declare the majors they want.)

**Fallacy of Authority**: Accepting for truth what is claimed simply because someone said so.

o        **Example:** John was late to class because his the school psychologist said John was having bouts of depression and may not attend class. (Actually, what the psychologist said may be wrong. Maybe John even lied to her.)

o        **Example:** John Grisham, an expert in law, says law is a tedious yet exciting practice. So it must be the case that law is a tedious, exciting practice. (Actually, what Grisham says may not be true. He hasn't supplied any reasoning for his assertion, and he's a popular fiction writer rather than a lawyer.)

**Faulty Cause and Effect**: Attributing the wrong cause to the effect.

- o **Example:** John was late to class because he went to the dentist yesterday and had a root canal. (Actually, John may be late for another reason.)

- o **Example:** The horses are acting strange because there's a deep storm brewing. (Actually, the horses may be acting strange because they're hungry.)

**Hasty Generalization:** Generalizing from a sample that is too small.

- o **Example:** John was late to my physics class all last semester. Therefore John is just an unpunctual, late person. (Actually, last semester John may have had difficulty getting to physics, but no trouble getting to his other classes.)

- o **Example:** I conclude from the several pleasant, hard-working AUC students I met this morning that all AUC students are pleasant, hard-working students. (Actually, you may have just met the only three nice students on campus.)

## Step 3: Brainstorming

**Find an original idea**

Brainstorming is the art of thinking critically to discover original, hidden insights about a topic. Assuming you've done a fair amount of research, you should now have a solid base of concepts to play around with for an essay. The task is now to stand on the shoulders of the scholars you've read and *find something original to say about the topic.* It is not enough to regurgitate what they have said. You must go beyond them to propose an original idea. Your paper should expose some new idea or insight about the topic, not just be a collage of other scholars' thoughts and research -- although you will definitely rely upon these scholars as you move toward your point.

**Use different techniques**

Since the days of Aristotle, a variety of "invention techniques" or "heuristics" have been used for coming up with ideas. Depending on your topic, some invention techniques may work better than others. The overall goal when using any method is to discover unique ideas that take you and your reader beyond the obvious.

## Step 4: Thesis

After researching, analyzing, and brainstorming, you should have an worthwhile insight to write about. Now it's time to convert that worthwhile insight into a polished thesis statement, which will then guide and shape the rest of the essay.

The thesis acts as the main claim of your paper, and typically appears near the end of the introduction. Unless you have a compelling reason to relocate the thesis from the traditional place, put it at the end of your introductory paragraph. Readers anticipate and read closely your thesis, and they want to find a polished statement there. The thesis expresses in one concise sentence the point and purpose of your essay.

**Make it arguable**

Your thesis must make an arguable assertion. To test whether your assertion is arguable, ask yourself whether it would be possible to argue the opposite. If not, then it's not a thesis -- it's more of a fact. For example:

- Not Arguable: `"Computers are becoming an efficient mechanism for managing and transmitting information in large businesses."` (Who's going to dispute this? It's not an arguable assertion -- it's a fact.)
- Arguable: `"Heavy use of computers may disrupt family cohesion and increase divorce in society."` (This is arguable because many people may not believe it. It would make a good thesis!)

**Be specific**

The thesis must also be specific. Avoid broad, vague generalizations. Your thesis should include detail and specificity, offering the reader the *why* behind your reasoning.

- Poor Specificity: "We should not pass the microchip bill." (Hey, not specific enough! It's just a value statement and doesn't provide enough reasoning for the reader.)
- Good Specificity: "Because the microchip insert causes serious health hazards such as cancer and brain tumors to those who use it, the microchip should not be passed." (Now the thesis is much more specific, and the reader gets a clear idea of what the essay is going to be about.)

**Avoid lists**

If your thesis consists of a long list of points, your essay will most likely be superficial. Suppose you had six reasons why WebCT should be adopted in college courses. Instead of trying to cover so much ground in your essay, narrow your focus more to give greater depth to fewer ideas, maybe discussing two or three points instead.

**Long lists result in shallow essays because you don't have space to fully explore an idea.** If you don't know what else to say about a point, do more brainstorming and research. However, if you're arguing a longer paper, and really need to cover this much ground, still avoid the list in your thesis -- just give the reader a general idea of your position, without being so specific.

- Example of a list: "The microchip bill biologically damages the health of children, invades the privacy of independent teenagers, increases crime, turns children against their parents, induces a sense of robotry about the individual, and finally, may result in the possible takeover of the government." (Wow, what a list! In a 1,000 word essay, each of these topics will only be explored superficially.)

- Narrower focus: "By surgically inserting circuitry similar to cell phone devices that has been known to cause headaches and fatigue, the microchip biologically endangers the health of children." (I've narrowed my focus to just one point -- health hazards -- instead of the six. Now my job will be to explore this assertion in depth. Academic writing almost always prefers depth over breadth.)

**Follow an "although . . . actually" format**

The "although . . . actually" format is one of the most effective ways of finding something original and controversial to say. In effect, you are telling someone that what he or she thought to be previously true really isn't. You're saying, *Hey, you thought X? Well, you're wrong. Really, it's Y!* Whenever you look beyond the obvious and give readers something new to consider, you're going to get their attention. Nothing works better than this "although . . . actually" format to set you up in delivering an insight.

- Example: *Although* it appears that computers may help students learn to write, *actually* they can become a detriment to the generation of what what creative writers call "flow."

- *Example: Although* many people believe that extraterrestials and crop circles are a figment of the imagination, *actually* there is strong evidence suggested by collective, distinct anecdotes that alien encounters are real.

- *Example: Although* some philosophers profess to lead more pure, thoughtful lives, *actually* philosophers are no different than other publication-hungry academics.

(Note: "actually" isn't always necessary. It is often implied with the clause "although.")

### Step 5: Outline

**Use an outline to plan**

Can you imagine a construction manager working on a skyscraper without a set of blueprints? No way! Similarly, writers construct essays using sets of blueprints or outlines to guide them in the writing process. Of course writers don't *have* to use outlines, but the effect is about the same as a construction worker who "freebuilds."

Drawing up an outline allows you to think before you write. What use is there in writing the entire paper only to realize that, had you done a little more planning beforehand, you would have organized your essay in an entirely different way? What if you realize later, after free-writing the essay, that you should have omitted some paragraphs, restructured the progression of your logic, and used more examples and other evidence?

You can go back and try to insert major revisions into the essay, but the effect may be like trying to add a thicker foundation to a building already constructed. The outline allows you to think beforehand what you're going to write so that when you do write it, if you've done your planning right, you won't have to do as much rewriting. (You will still, of course, need to revise.)

**Make your points brief**

When you construct your outline, keep it brief. The titles, headings, and points in your outline should be about one line each. Remember that you are only drawing an outline of the forest, not detailing each of the trees. Keep each line under a dozen words. If you can't compress your point into a one-liner, you probably don't have a clear grasp of what you're trying to say.

When you describe the point of each paragraph, phrase the point in a mini-claim. If the point of a paragraph is that *soft drugs should be legal because they are relatively harmless*, don't just write "soft drugs" as the point of the paragraph in your outline -- it's too brief and vague. Instead, write "drugs should be legal b/c soft drugs are harmlessl." This description is still brief, as it should be (one line or less), but it makes a claim that gives it purpose in the outline.

**Choose an appropriate arrangement**

Drawing up an outline allows you to see at a glance how each of the paragraphs fits into the larger picture. When looking at your paragraphs from this perspective, you can easily shift around the order to see how a reorganization might be better. Remember that each paragraph in the essay should support the position or argument of your paper.

As you're shifting paragraphs around (maybe like you would a Rubic's cube), you will probably begin to wonder what the best arrangement really is. In general, put what you want the reader to remember either first or last, not in the middle. Studies in rhetoric have shown the readers remember least what is

presented in the middle of an essay. Hence, the middle is where you should probably put your weaker arguments and counterarguments.

Some writers urge a climactic arrangement, one that works up to your strongest point, which is delivered as a kind of grand finale. Another successful arrangement is the inductive argument, in which you build up the evidence first, and then draw conclusions. A problem-solution format involves presenting the problem first and then outlining the solution — this works well for some topics because it is a soft version of the scientific method. Whatever your choice, choose an arrangement that presents a clear, logical argument.

### Step 6: The Introduction

**Get the reader's attention**

The first goal in your introduction is to grab the reader's attention. Wake him or her up and generate some interest about the topic. To grab the reader's attention, you might present . . .

- an interesting fact
- a surprising piece of information
- an exciting quotation
- an intriguing paradox
- an explanation of an odd term
- a short narrative/anecdote (not fiction)
- a provocative question

**Jump right into the Issue**

In a short essay (under 1,000 words), a lengthy introduction is hardly needed. After getting the reader's attention, just jump right into the issue and begin directly, perhaps describing a specific, concrete situation -- presumably the context of the problem you're exploring. Avoid beginning your essay with broad statements or bland generalizations such as "X is becoming an issue . . . " or "Throughout time man has wondered . . . ." Do not begin so broad and general that the first several sentences could fit nearly any essay in the world. For example:

- Too General: Crime has been an issue throughout time.
- More Specific: The question of the severity of punishments for juveniles is an issue that has garnered attention due to the increasing number of juvenile shootings in the last several years.

- Too General: Man has always wondered about the meaning of information.
- More Specific: The Age of Information brought about through the digital revolution of computers has posed significant questions about the value and worth of this information: Does having instant access to every newspaper and journal blog in the world make us more intelligent, value-based people?

I like how Michele Montaigne, a sixteenth-century essayist, explains how to write an introduction: "For me, who ask only to become wiser, not more learned or eloquent, these logical and Aristotelian arrangements are not to the point. I want a man to begin with the conclusion. I understand well enough what death and pleasure are; let him not waste his time anatomizing them. I look for good solid reasons from the start, which will instruct me in how to sustain their attack. . . . I do not want a man to use his strength making me attentive and to shout at me fifty times "Or oyez!" in the manner of our heralds. . . . These are so many words lost on me. I come fully prepared from my house; I need no allurement or sauce; I can perfectly well eat my meat quite raw; and instead of whetting my appetite by these preparations and preliminaries, they pall and weary it" ("Of Books").

In other words, don't tire your reader with long introductions that fail to get quickly to the point and issue. Begin with specifics and jump right into the problem or conflict you are addressing. When readers see a good conflict, they are likely to take an interest in it.

**Present your thesis**

The entire introduction should lead toward the presentation of your arguable assertion, or thesis, whereby you take a stand on the issue you are discussing. Deliver your thesis at the end of the introduction so that your reader knows what general position you will take in your essay. You don't need to spell out all the nitty gritty details of your thesis in the introduction, particularly if it would be bulky and unintelligible to the reader who lacks all the ensuing reference and context, but you should give the reader a good idea of what your argument is. As you do this, avoid saying "I will discuss . . ." or "I intend to argue . . ."

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**Step 7: Paragraphs**

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**Choose a singular focus**

Each paragraph should have a clear, singular focus to it. If there is an overriding error students make in writing essays, it is shifting topics within the same paragraph, rather than continuing to develop the same idea they began with. A paragraph is a discrete unit of thought that expands one specific idea, not three or four. If you find yourself shifting gears to start a new topic, begin a new paragraph instead.

Someone once compared the beginning of a new paragraph to the changing angle of a wall. When the angle of the wall changes, a new wall begins. Let your paragraphs be like that wall: running straight along a certain angle, and beginning anew when the angle changes.

**Begin with a topic sentence**

Nothing will help you keep a tighter focus on your paragraphs than topic sentences. A topic sentence is generally the first sentence of the paragraph, and it describes the claim or point of the paragraph, thus orienting the reader to the purpose of the paragraph. When you use topic sentences, your reader will invariably find it easier to follow your thoughts and argument. As an example, look at the first sentences of each paragraph on this page. The entire paragraph is focused around the stated topic sentence. Additionally, headings are used to make it even clearer and easier to follow. If you're writing a long research essay (10 + pages), you might consider using headings.

**Develop the idea**

Invariably students shift topics and lose focus within their paragraphs because they do not know how to adequately develop their ideas. They usually know the paragraph needs to be longer, but they don't know how to expand their idea to fill that length. Indeed a paragraph should be at least half a page long, but usually no more than one page. How, then, if you don't have enough to say, do you fill that paragraph length? Instead of broadening the focus, which will only be another form of topic shifting, try implementing these techniques for development:

- illustrate your idea with examples
- give an authoritative quotation
- anticipate and respond to counterarguments
- back your ideas with more evidence
- offer another perspective to the idea
- brainstorm more insights about the idea
- elaborate on causes/effects, definitions, comparison/contrasts

**Recap your main idea**

If your essay was long and complex, sometimes difficult to follow, in the conclusion you'll want to recap your ideas in a clear, summarizing manner. You want your readers to understand the message you intended to communicate. However, if your essay was short and simple, don't insult your readers by restating at length the ideas they already understand. Strike a balance according to what you feel your readers need. In a short essay (600 words or less), any recapitulation should be brief (about 2 sentences), and rephrased in a fresh way, not just cut and pasted from the thesis.

**Leave a memorable impression**

It's not enough just to restate your main ideas -- if you only did that and then ended your essay, your conclusion would be flat and boring. You've got to make a *graceful* exit from your essay by leaving a memorable impression on the reader. You need to say something that will continue to simmer in the reader's minds long after he or she has put down your essay. To leave this memorable impression, try . . .

- giving a thought-provoking quotation
- describing a powerful image
- talking about consequences or implications
- stating what action needs to be done
- ending on an interesting twist of thought
- explaining why the topic is important

**Keep it short**

Keep your conclusion short, probably ten lines or less, and avoid fluff. You're just trying to make a clever exit, and presumably all the really important points have been made previously in your essay. You should not introduce any totally new ideas in the conclusion; however, you should not merely repeat your thesis either. This situation -- not presenting anything new, and neither just sticking with the old -- at first seems to be a paradox. However, with a little effort, one of the above six methods will usually yield "a quiet zinger," as John Tribble calls it.

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**Examples of Real Conclusions**

1. *Ending on an image*

Today, as the phonographs which follow prove, the mystique of the cat is still very much alive in the Egyptian environment. For after all, should not the cat be important in the Muslim world, as apparently God inspired man to write its name-qi, t, t in Arabic letters-in such a shape that it looks like a cat?

--Lorraine Chittock, *Cairo Cats*

2. *Restating the thesis in a fresh way*

If this book has any future use, it will be as a modest contribution to that challenge, and as a warning: that systems of thought like Orientalism, discourses of power, ideological fictions-mind-forg'd manacles-are all too easily made, applied, and guarded. Above all, I hope to have shown my reader that the answer to Orientalism is not Occidentalism. No former "Oriental" will be comforted by the thought that having been an Oriental himself he is likely-too likely-to study new "Orientals"-or "Occidentals"-of his own making. If the knowledge of Orientalism has any meaning, it is in being a reminder of the seductive degradation of knowledge, of any knowledge, anywhere, at any time. Now perhaps more than before.

*--Orientalism,* Edward Said

*3. Ending on an image*

When one reads any strongly individual piece of writing, one has the impression of seeing a face somewhere behind the page. It is not necessarily the actual face of the writer. I feel this very strongly with Swift, with Defoe, with Fielding, Stendhal, Thackeray, Flaubert, though in several case I do not know what these people looked like and do not want to know. What one sees is the face that the writer ought to have. Well, in the case of Dickens I see a face that is not quite the face of Dickens's photographs, though it resembles it. It is the face of a man of about forty, with a small beard and a high colour. He is laughing, with a touch of anger in his laughter, but no triumph, no malignity. It is the face of a man who is always fighting against something, but who fights in the open and is not frightened, the face of a man who is generously angry-in other words, of a nineteenth-century liberal, a free intelligence, a type hated with equal hatred by all the smelly little orthodoxies which are now contending for our souls.

--"Charles Dickens," George Orwell

*4. Ending on a quotation*

A popular tale, which I picked up in Geneva during the last years of World War I, tells of Miguel Servet's reply to the inquisitors who had condemned him to the stake: "I will burn, but this is a mere event. We shall continue our discussion in eternity."

--Jorge Luis Borges, *Nonfictions*

*5. Moving towards the general*

The practice of rhetoric involves a careful attention to the characteristics and preferences of the audience for whom the writer intends the message. Although Syfers' and Limpus' essays might be somewhat out of place for a contemporary audience, in the 1970s they were not. However, as argued throughout this essay, it is Syfers' memorable sarcasm and wit that ultimately win over her audience. Being humorous while also driving home a worthwhile point is a difficult feat to accomplish in writing. Because Syfers accomplishes it so well, she seems to have stepped over the boundaries of time and reached a much larger audience than she may have originally intended.

--imitation of a student essay

*6. Talking about implications or consequences*

I am quite convinced that what hinders progress in the Arab world is the absence of a free press. The dirt in our society has been swept under the carpet for too long. But I am certain that this won't be the case for much longer. Arabs are beginning to engage in lively debate over their political and social predicament. And Al-Jazeera offers a ray of hope. Already, other Arab stations are imitating The Opposite Direction, though with limitations. Press freedom leads to political freedom. Someday, in spite of the attempts by today's totalitarian rulers, a free Arab press may help to create real democracy in the Arab world.

--Fasial al-Kasim, "Crossfire: The Arab Version"

## Step 9: MLA Style

When using ideas or phrases from other writers in your own essay, you must correctly cite in your text exactly where the ideas or phrases come from. Correctly identifying these ideas and phrases is called "in-text citation," and the page at the end of your essay listing the sources you used is called a "Works Cited" page.

Different disciplines follow different style guides for in-text citation and Works Cited pages, but in most writing courses, because they fall under the humanities discipline, MLA (Modern Language Association) Style is used. Although there are many details and rules about incorporating research into your essay, the following five basic principles will help you correctly ingetrate sources in your essay.

**1. Make sure all authors cited in the body of your essay also appear on the Works Cited page.**

If you quote Jones, Smith, and Johnson in your essay, these three authors should appear with full documentation on the Works Cited pagel. Don't forget them. Likewise, all the authors or sources listed in the Works Cited page should appear in the body of your essay. There should be no sources listed on the Works Cited page that were not cited in your actual essay.

**2. Only quote catchy or memorable phrases or sentences.**

If the source you're quoting is unremarkable and dry in its expression or opinion, don't bring that unremarkable, dry text into your own writing as well. Paraphrase this material instead, and follow up your paraphrase with the author's name in parentheses (or the article title, if there is no author). Only quote catchy, memorable, quotable phrases, and keep the quotations short -- one or two lines usually. In general you want to quote sparingly and preserve your own voice.

**3. Don't rely too much on the same source.**

If you have four or five quotes from the same author, your reader will eventually just desire to read that author instead. Too much quoting also compromises your own voice and sense of authority about the issue. Rather than limiting your research to one or two authors, draw upon a wide variety of sources, and quote only snippets from each. Having variety will ensure that you are well read in the subject and that you've examined the issue from multiple perspectives.

**4. Follow up your quotations with commentary, interpretation, or analysis.**

Avoid just dropping in the quotation and then immediately moving on, assuming the reader fully understands the meaning, purpose, and application of the quotation just presented. You almost always should comment on the quotation in some way, even if your commentary is a simple reexplanation of what the quotation means ("In other words . . ."). Remember that you're taking the quotation from an article you've read, but the reader only gets a glimpse of that whole article and lacks the context that you have, so it might be more difficult for the reader to understand it. Because the essay is supposed to represent *your* ideas, not just those of another, you must find some way to comment or analyze what you summarize or quote.

**5. Use signal phrases to introduce your quotations.**

A signal phrase is a clause before the quotation that identifies the author (e.g., "Jones says," or "According to Jones . . ."). Signal phrases are essential to create a bridge between your own voice and that of another you are incorporating into your essay. If you identify the author in the signal phrase, don't also identify author in parentheses following the quotation. Once is enough.

Also, don't put the article title in the signal phrase unless you want to draw particular attention it. Including the article title in your signal phrase usually results in a long, clunky pre-quote phrase that takes the focus off the quotation.

- Example of a clunky pre-quote signal phrase: ~~According to the article "Censorship in American High School Reading Classes,~~" Twain's Huckleberry Finn has been "sacrificed to the gods of political correctness, without any attention to its literary merits." (*Avoid putting the article title in the signal phrase.*)
- Better: According to the *American Quarterly Review*, Twain's Huckleberry Finn has been "sacrificed to the gods of political correctness, without any attention to its literary merits."
- Even Better: According to Edmund Wilson, "Twain rewrote the American setting through his character Huck Finn."

- Example of redundancy: Mark Twain says the secret to success is "making your vocation your vacation" (Twain.) (*We don't need Twain identified twice!*)

Special note--"qtd. in": Suppose you're using a quotation that appears inside an article written by someone other than the one saying the quotation. In other words, if you're using, say, Judge William's quotation that appears within Mary Jones' article, you cite it by writing "qtd. in" following the quote. If so, write "qtd. in Jones," or whomever.

- Example: According to Judge Williams, "just law is the foundation of a just society" (qtd. in Jones).

If Jones is just paraphrasing Williams, then you would omit the "qtd. in" and just write (Jones).

Practice: Read Diana Hacker's sample research essay and identify as many instances as you can where the above five principles are used.

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**Step 9a: Citation**

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There are three main ways to integrate quotations into your essay: (1) direct quotation, (2) paraphrase, and (3) mixed quotation. You should usually paraphrase the material, and only directly quote it or give a mixed quotation when the phrasing of the quotation is interesting or catchy in some pleasing way -- quote when the text is quotable, in other words (like the quotation on the homepage of this site).

**1. Direct Quotation**

Direct quotation involves quoting word for word one or more sentences from an author or source. When you quote, be sure to introduce your quotation with a signal phrase. A signal phrase is a clause that lets the reader know who the author or source is. In the following examples of direct quotation, note how the signal phrases precede the quotations:

- According to Karl Menninger, a Freudian psychoanalyst, "the wish to kill, unexpectedly robbed of certain external occasions or objects of unconscious gratification, may be turned back upon the person of the wisher and carried into effect as suicide" (54). (*Notice how the phrase "a Freudian psychoanalyst" explains who Menninger is. Phrases that rename their subjects like this must always be enclosed in commas.*)

- Menninger says that "suicide occurs when an individual thus treats himself as an external object, frequently identified with the very object toward which his love and hate, particularly his unconscious wish to kill, had been directed" (55). (*The inclusion of the word "that" allows you to omit the comma. If you don't use "that," however, then you would need the comma.*)

- Menninger says, "In Catholic countries there is usually a higher homicide rate, a lower suicide rate; in Protestant countries a higher suicide and lower homicide rate" (61). (*The number in parentheses indicates what page the quotation is on. If your source doesn't have page numbers (e.g., a website), then do not invent any page or paragraph numbers here.*)

## 2. Paraphrase

Paraphrase, instead of quoting the author word for word, involves putting the original phrasing into your own words. Be careful to substantially reword the original, however. If you leave just several words in a row unchanged, it will be considered plagiarism -- because you're essentially stealing someone else's phrasing.

As far as signal phrases and paraphrasing go, when you paraphrase you can choose whether or not to use a signal phrase. If you do not use a signal phrase, you must identify the author in parentheses following the paraphrase. Here are a few examples:

- Freudian psychoanalyst Karl Menninger says that people who are deprived of the ability to kill others usually end up turning their murderous anger back upon themselves to commit suicide (54). *(Notice how I've totally reworded this from the previous section. The rewording is my own phrasing.)*

- Suicide occurs when an individual redirects his initially outward-directed hatred back upon himself (Menninger 55). *(Notice that there is no signal phrase here, so I have identified the author in parentheses following the paraphrase.)*

- Menninger explains that Catholic countries report higher rates of homicide and lower rates of suicide, while Protestant countries report the reverse: more suicides and less homicides (61). *(Notice that the author is identified in the signal phrase, so I don't need to identify him again in the parentheses following the paraphrase.)*

## 3. Mixed Quotations

Mixed quotations are a mix between direct quotation and paraphrase. Mixed quotations involve paraphrasing half of the original but mixing in a few direct selections from the author. When you insert mixed quotations, be sure to blend in the quotation with the grammar of your own sentence. The sentence as a whole must flow smoothly.

To achieve this smooth flow with mixed quotations, you may need to omit or add words from or to the original. To omit words, insert an **ellipses . . .** in place of the words you take out. Ellipses always indicate omission. To add words, insert them inside **brackets [ ]** to indicate the insertion. Notice that there are spaces between the ellipses dots and that the brackets are square, not rounded like parentheses.

- e.e. Cummings asserted that the poet's imagination and his "preoccupation with the Verb" results in an ability to surpass normal standards of logic and create "an irresistible truth [in which] 2 x 2 = 5" (34). *(Notice that the words "in which" inside brackets are my own insertion. I needed to add them so that the sentence would flow grammatically.)*

- B.F. Skinner, a social constructionist, believes that our behavior is "a genetic endowment traceable to the evolutionary history of the species" and that whatever predispositions or character we have developed, it is a consequence of our environmental immersion rather than innate character (78). *(I chose to quote partially here to be accurate with Skinner's definition, but I didn't want to quote too much from Skinner because his writing may be difficult for my audience to understand.)*

- Poet Wallace Stevens, when asked about his literary influences, explained that he was "not conscious of having been influenced by anybody and ha[d] purposely held off from reading . . . Eliot and Pound" in order to refrain from unconsciously imitating their works and ruining his originality (234). *(Note the ellipses. I omitted several words to shorten the quotation around the essential point I wanted to communicate. I also had to change "have" to "had," and so wrote ha[d] to indicate the alteration..)*

**Plagiarism**

*Plagiarism* -- its original meaning, "to kidnap" -- is a serious academic offense that can result in your failure of the course and possible suspension from the university. It is important that you know what plagiarism entails so that you can avoid the consequences. Ignorance is no excuse.

In short, plagiarism occurs whenever a student attempts to pass off someone else's ideas or phrasing as his or her own, rather than giving due credit to the author. Even if the student mentions the source, if he or she fails to put quotation marks around phrasing not his or her own, it is considered plagiarism, because the student is attempting to pass off phrasing that does not belong to him or her.

You can learn more about plagiarism in two easy ways:

1. Take this excellent ten question plagiarism quiz prepared by Indiana University. Highly recommended!

2. Read about plagiarism from AUC's Academic Integrity site.

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**Step 10: Language**

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According to Truman Capote, "The greatest pleasure of writing is not what it's about, but the music the words make." As you edit the language of your essay, you are trying to make music out of the words.

In this step the content of your essay should be solid. If the idea itself needs discarding, you shouldn't be tweaking the language; it would be a waste of time working on transitions if the organization and structure of your essay were in need of repair. Hence editing the language of your essay comes last. Here you are putting polish on a shoe that has already been sewn.

Editing the language can be tedious, but it is essential. You've got to proofread your essays dozens of times to catch all the rough spots and language errors. As you proofread you will be checking for misspellings, poor mechanics, bad grammar, awkward word flow and numerous other linguistic details that you can improve. Proofreading the language may take hours as you attempt to polish your language to the point that it is pleasing to read and has literary style.

**Give Your Eyes Rest**

The more you read your essay, the more blind you become to it. Soon you stop reading the words on the page and only begin reading what's in your mind, which you falsely transpose onto the page. The actual letters could be Hebrew, or Greek, for all it matters at that point.

Don't keep reading hour after hour until your mind registers the entire text at a glance, without seeing the details. What you must do is rest your eyes; take a break. Give yourself a day or two between revisions. (This is why you should not procrastinate your assignments.) When you come back to your essay with fresh eyes and a renewed perspective, you will see with added clarity all the rough phrasings and strange ideas that your eyes once glided over.

**Know What to Look For**

You can read your essay a thousand times over, but if you don't know what you're looking for, you will probably miss all the errors you're attempting to find. If you're going to work hard, make sure you're putting all your energy to a productive use. Know what to look for when you proofread. There are twelve areas to look for: logic, evidence, development, focus, structure, unity, integration, in-text citation, works cited, grammar, clarity, style. Check off each category as you examine your essay. Another help for proofreading is to ask yourself the same questions in the **Peer Review**, conducting instead a "self-review." Finally, be sure to use the spell-checker and grammar-checker in Word.

**Don't Plagiarize**

You might want to ask a friend to read over your essay and give suggestions for change. This is usually advantageous. Some students, however, perhaps feeling pressure to bring their language level up to a more fluent, "A" level, might ask their friends to go beyond a few simple suggestions and instead to heavily edit or rewrite the language of their paper. While it is generally okay for another to get *some* feedback from others on ideas and language, your friend or family member cannot take upon the role of an editor, changing your sentences and thoughts to reflect a linguistic and analytical level that is not yours and which is beyond your ability. Passing off another's language as your own -- even if the ideas remain original to your own mind -- is considered plagiarism. Your work must be your own, and that includes the language and style, not just content.

Knowing that the work is your own, and that it represents your highest level of performance, you will feel a sense of achievement and personal growth that perhaps you have not experienced before. Each essay should seem to you that it is your best work to date. Only when you feel this way is the paper done.

Continue on to editing your language for clarity, style, and grammar.

<div align="center">**Stage 10a: Clarity**</div>

**Use topic sentences**

Few techniques add more clarity to your writing than well-formed topic sentences. Topic sentences usually appear at or near the beginning of each paragraph and tell the reader what the topic of the paragraph will be. Using topic sentences to "signpost" your meaning will orient the reader and help him or her follow comfortably along your path of thought.

You will discover that when a writer uses topic sentences, you can skim the entire essay and still understand the main points. The next time you read a long essay, try reading only the first one or two sentences of each paragraph. You will rarely be lost or confused if the topic sentences make clear what the purpose of each paragraph is.

**Make clear transitions**

Transitions act as bridges between your paragraphs. Since each paragraph offers a distinct thought, you need to connect these two distinct thoughts in some logical way for the reader. The transitions supply the logic of how two paragraphs connect, how one idea leads to the next, or how the two are related. Don't make the reader guess how one paragraph relates to the other. The following are some common patterns for transitions:

- Not only is vegetarianism unhealthy for the human body, vegetariarism also creates an excess of pesticides in the environment. *(Here I'm transitioning from health hazards to environmental hazards.)*
- In addition to problems of obesity, America's youth also suffer from increasing amounts of psychological stress. *(Here I'm transitioning from obesity to psychological stress.)*
- Besides violating the right to privacy, the microchip also puts children at danger in the even of information-hacking. *(Here I'm transitioning from privacy to information-hacking.)*

**Omit needless words**

"Omit needless words!" "Omit needless words!" This was the constant advice, says E.B. White, of his former professor, William Strunk. White says Strunk would occasionally grab a student by the lapels and shout this phrase several times, but then be almost restricted from elaborating more for fear of violating the very principle he was teaching. *Omit needless words, write with concision, make your sentences succinct, cut out the fat, remove the deadwood, make every word pull its own weight* -- these common

phrases are all intended to convince students to streamline their prose with more efficiency and power by removing unnecessary words.

In Strunk's own words, "Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts." In other words, if you bought a new car and looked under the hood, you would be appalled to see unnecessary, functionless parts. Similarly in an essay, all sentences and paragraphs must have an essential function and purpose.

Concision can also be understood through the metaphor of dilution. A word by itself has a sense of power, but when combined with other words, the power of that word is diluted by the presence of the other words, each of which is fighting for the reader's attention. If you want to focus the reader's attention, don't dilute your best words with unnecessary phrases and elaborations. In this way, more can be less.

- Needless Words: A good basketball player is not necessarily one who is tall and dominating on the floor, or who has more height than the other players (e.g., 6'7" and above), but rather one who is keen enough to perceive strengths and weaknesses on the court, can see mismatches, liabilities, weak spots, and knows as well how to capitalize on his or her own strengths, be they speed, quickness, or explosive driving power.
- Concise: A good basketball player is not necessarily one who is tall and dominating, but rather one who can perceive strengths and weaknesses on the court, can see mismatches, liabilities, weak spots, and knows as well how to capitalize on his or her own strengths, be they speed, quickness, or explosive driving power.
- Super Concise: A good basketball player needs prudence more than height.

- Needless Words: Rugby players must be fully prepared and always ready to immolate their almost already war-torn bodies in sacrifice, in diving ruthlessly for the leather ball, blocking with their arms extended and their legs firmly planted on the ground, always moving with tenacity and vigor and enthusiasm across the expansive green lawn, for the good of the team and the honor of the sport itself. Long live the Queen!
- Concise: Rugby players must be fully prepared to immolate their bodies in sacrifice, in diving ruthlessly for the ball, blocking with their arms extended and their legs firmly planted, always moving with tenacity and vigor across the expansive green lawn, for the good of the team and the honor of the sport itself.
- Super Concise: Rugby players sacrifice their bodies for the game.

**Establish emphasis**

Subordination and coordination allow you to *emphasize* different parts of the sentence, so that the more important phrase is clear. Choosing between subordinate or coordinate clauses alerts you to the hierarchical relationships between information in your sentences and allows you to stress or emphasize certain ideas more than others.

Coordination involves combining clauses in a way that puts them on equal footing, where neither clause is more emphasized than the other. Coordinate clauses are joined with one of the seven coordinating conjunctions -- and, but, or, for, so, nor, yet. On the other hand, subordination (like it's root, subordinate) involves designating one clause to be more important than the other. Subordinate clauses usually begin with although, while, or because.

- Subordinating Clauses: Although the train improved mobility and efficiency of travel, it put many cowboys out of work. *(The red clause is subordinate; it does not have as much emphasis as the cowboy clause.)*
- Coordinating Clauses: The train improved the mobility and efficiency of travel, and it put many cowboys out of work. *(Both clauses have equal emphasis.)*

- Subordinating Clauses: Even though many cowboys were out of work, they began a new culture of city dwelling that drew them together with social strength. *(The red clause has less emphasis.)*
- Coordinating Clauses: Many cowboys were out of work, but they began a new culture of city dwelling that drew them together with social strength.

- Subordinating Clauses: While many thought the cowboy era was over, the new city cowboys proved to be a vital, powerful force in American unpopular culture. *(The red clause has less emphasis.)*
- Coordinating Clauses: Many thought the cowboy era was over, yet the new city cowboys proved to be a vital, powerful force in American unpopular culture.

**Use Rhythm**

If you really want to get fancy with emphasis, you can experiment with periodic and cumulative sentences. Periodic and cumulative sentences are two advanced options for creating a strong sense of rhythm and emphasis in your sentence. The periodic sentence is one in which the main clause is considerably delayed, whereas the cumulative sentence opens quickly with the main clause, and then adds on multiple nonrestrictive clauses after it.

- Periodic sentence: Sigmund Freud, a German psychologist born in the late nineteenth century, and famous for his controversial theories about early-childhood psychological formation and other adult disorders, including suicide, patricide, and matricide, omitted essential data formulating his theories.
- Cumulative sentence: Sigmund Freud omitted essential data when formulating his theories, which involved explanations for early-childhood psychological formation and other adult disorders, including suicide, patricide, and matricide, which he developed in the early twentieth century in Germany, where he was born.

- Periodic sentence: Apparently Coca-Cola, which is currently used by its own manufacturers to clean out the engines of their trucks, as well as remove toilet stains, purify the stomach of questionable bacteria, and marinate steak in several hours (frightening facts about a substance harmlessly and thoughtlessly consumed by millions of people around the world), originally it was laced with cocaine.
- Cumulative sentence: Apparently Coca-Cola once contained cocaine, which in the early twentieth century was not thought to be harmful taken in small doses, especially when the dose was only 1/1400 of a grain per bottle, hardly something to give one a heavy addiction, yet still strong enough to mildly lure one to consuming the soda, which was not so different from various medicines at the time, also containing slight trace amounts of cocaine, practically unavoidable byproducts from cocoa leaves.
- Cumulative: "I wish I could give you fresh material, but I can't," said Max King, another classmate, who went on to edit The Philadelphia Inquirer and now, by coincidence, is president of the Heinz Endowments, the wealthy Pittsburgh charity of which Mr. Kerry's wife, Teresa, is the chairwoman. (*The New York Times,* 16 May 2004, "Prep School Peers Found Kerry Talented, Ambitious, and Apart.")

**Be straightforward**

Beyond any of the above techniques, you can increase the clarity of your writing by practicing a general straightforwardness in the expression of your ideas. Look over your sentences and ask yourself whether they communicate their ideas in the clearest way possible. You may want to pretend that a twelve-year-old will be reading your text. Will he understand what you're talking about? Remember that while your reader may possess more sophistication than a young child, you don't want to make the reader struggle to follow your ideas. Keep your meaning simple and easy to understand.

To really be clear, you might try talking out your sentences. Imagine yourself saying what you've written to a friend sitting beside you. If you can imagine yourself speaking to your friend with the same sentences you've written, chances are your writing is probably clear and easy to follow. On the other hand, if you

can't see yourself saying what you've written to anyone, consider revising it to make it more readable. Go back and revise your sentences to make them friendlier, clearer, more straightforward.

## Step 10c: Grammar

As you edit the grammar of your essay, you should particularly focus on the grammar concepts that your teacher has previously marked on your papers. For example, if your teacher has written "run-on" on your previous papers, especially look at the following instruction on run-ons and then look carefully over your essay to make sure you're avoiding them. You should also be familiar with all the rest of the grammar concepts here and be sure that your essay is grammatically correct. If a term below looks unfamiliar, learn it. Although a grammatically perfect essay won't mean that the essay is also perfect, a teacher is less apt to give you a poor grade if he or she is unable to justify that grade with grammatical errors. In the minds of many old fashioned teachers, perfect grammar equals a perfect essay. When you're done editing for grammar, and you've proofread your essay a dozen times, you're done. Congratulations!

**Fragments**: Fragments are incomplete sentences that lack a subject or verb. Or, if the sentence does seem to have a subject or verb, the subject and verb appear in a subordinate clause rather than the main, independent clause.

- Swam in the ocean. (no subject)
- Frank in the ocean. (no verb)
- Frank swimming in the ocean. (not an independent clause)
- *Correction:* Frank swam in the ocean.

Fragments are harder to spot when they are next to real sentences, but they are still fragments.

- Frank went to the beach. Swam in the ocean.
- *Correction:* Frank went to the beach and swam in the ocean.

- It was the last thing I thought I'd see. Frank in the ocean.
- *Correction:* The last thing I thought I'd see was Frank in the ocean.

- There are a few things I hate. Frank swimming in the ocean.
- *Correction:* There are a few things I hate. Frank swimming in the ocean is one of them.

**Run-ons**: There are two types of run-on sentences: fused sentences and comma splices. A **fused sentence** occurs when two sentences are fused or blended into one, without any punctuation. A **comma splice** occurs when two independent clauses are joined together with only a comma, rather than with a comma and a coordinating conjunction. A comma is not sufficient to join two independent clauses. You must use a comma *and* a coordinating conjunction (and, but, or, for, so, nor, yet).

- Frank was an orphan from Kentucky he didn't have any parents and lived in a foster home.
- *Correction:* Frank was an orphan from Kentucky. He didn't have any parents and lived in a foster home.

- He liked to spend his days at the beach no one bothered him there.
- *Correction:* He liked to spend his days at the beach. No one bothered him there.

- Sally went to the beach, she had a picnic there.
- *Correction:* Sally went to the beach, and she had a picnic there.

- The weather at the beach was rather windy, you had to keep a hold of your hat or it would blow off.
- *Correction:* The weather at the beach was rather windy, so you had to keep a hold of your hat or it would blow off.

**Capitalization**: Capitalize words that are specific names. Do not capitalize a word just to give it emphasis.

- st. petersberg beach is a place where many a love has been ignited, according to local Professors.
- *Correction:* St. Petersberg Beach is a place where many a love has been ignited, according to local professors.

- According to shakespeare's *romeo and juliet,* the Truest love is frequently a star-crossed love.
- *Correction:* According to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet,* the truest love is frequently a star-crossed love.

**Possessives**: To indicate possession, use an apostrophe before an "s." To indicate possession for a plural subject, add an apostrophe after the "s."

- Sallys hair needed washing.
- *Correction:* Sally's hair needed washing.

- Ones need for companionship is second only to ones need for food.
- *Correction:* One's need for companionship is second only to one's need for food.

- The lifeguards tower chairs were empty due to the lack of people on the beach.
- *Correction:* The lifeguard's tower chairs were empty due to the lack of people on the beach.

**Tense Shifts**: A tense shift occurs when a verb breaks the unity of the other tenses in the sentence. Be especially careful of shifting between past and present tenses with your verbs.

- When Frank saw Sally sitting on her picnic blanket, his jaw drops and his eyes get all wide.
- *Correction:* When Frank saw Sally sitting on her picnic blanket, his jaw dropped and his eyes got all wide.

- Upon seeing Frank stand nobly above his glorious sandcastle, Sally fainted and had fallen backwards onto the ground.
- *Correction:* Upon seeing Frank stand nobly above his sandcastle, she fainted and fell backwards onto the ground.

**Subject-verb Agreement**: Subject-verb agreement errors occur when the subject doesn't match up correctly with the verb. Usually the error occurs when the subject is singular and the verb is plural, or when the subject is plural and the verb singular.

- Sally's took out the biscuits, butter, and jam that was in her basket.
- *Correction:* Sally took out the biscuits, butter, and jam that were in her basket.

- Frank made a sandcastle, along with a surrounding moat and turret, that was very eye-catching.
- *Correction:* Frank made a sandcastle, along with a surrounding moat and turret, that were very eye-catching.

**Pronoun Agreement**: Pronoun agreement errors occur when the pronoun and the corresponding subject do not match up. Plural subjects have plural pronouns, and singular subjects have singular pronouns.

- If a boy wants to impress a girl, they better do more than build sandcastles.
- *Correction:* If a boy wants to impress a girl, he better do more than build sandcastles.
- When someone is lonely, they usually go on a picnic.
- *Correction:* When someone is lonely, he or she usually goes on a picnic.

**Note**: The following pronouns are singular pronouns: anyone, everyone, whoever, someone, no one, nobody.

**Misplaced Modifiers**: A misplaced modifier occurs when a clause is incorrectly placed in a sentence such that it appears to modify the wrong word.

- Recovering slowly, the fainting spell that Sally experienced gradually diminished. (The fainting spell didn't recover slowly--Sally did!)
- *Correction:* Recovering slowly, Sally gradually returned from her fainting spell.

- Ever worried, Frank quickly ran towards Sally, very concerned about helping her. (Sally isn't very concerned--Frank is!)
- *Correction:* Ever worried and very concerned about helping her, Frank quickly ran towards Sally.

**Commas**: In general, use a comma wherever you want to insert a light, natural pause. There are also specific rules to guide you in placing commas.

1. Use a comma after an introductory clause.

- When Sally opened her eyes and looked around her she thought she was in a dream.
- *Correction:* When Sally opened her eyes and looked around her, she thought she was in a dream.

- Seeing Sally return to full composure Frank asked if he might have a sandwich.
- *Correction:* Seeing Sally return to full composure, Frank asked if he might have a sandwich.

2. Use commas to set off non-restrictive clauses or parenthetical expressions. (A non-restrictive clause is a clause that doesn't restrict the sentence's meaning -- it can be dropped without changing the meaning.)

- The sandwich which was pickle and peanut butter with ketchup mixed in looked repulsive to Frank and made him almost vomit.
- *Correction:* The sandwich**,** which was pickle and peanut butter with ketchup mixed in**,** looked repulsive to Frank and made him feel ill.

- Sally who grew up in a small farm town in Nebraska said that's how everyone eats his or her sandwich.
- *Correction:* Sally**,** who grew up in a small farm town in Nebraska**,** said that's how everyone eats his or her sandwich.

3. When joining two independent clauses with a coordinating conjunction (and, but, or, for, so, nor, yet), put a comma before the coordinating conjunction. (Note: an independent clause is a clause that can stand alone as a full sentence.)

- Frank said to nevermind about the sandwich because he wasn't hungry and he proceeded to lay down beside Sally.
- *Correction:* Frank said to nevermind about the sandwich because he wasn't hungry**,** and he proceeded to lay down beside Sally.

- Sally asked if Frank came to the beach often and he said today was in fact the first time he had ever visited the place.
- *Correction:* Sally asked if Frank came to the beach often**,** and he said today was in fact the first time he had ever visited the place.

**Semi-colons**: If two independent clauses are closely related, you can join the clauses with a semi-colon rather than a comma and coordinating conjunction. You must be be sure, however, that independent clauses are on both sides of the semi-colon.

- Frank asked Sally out for a date that night she accepted enthusiastically.
- *Correction:* Frank asked Sally out for a date that night**;** she accepted enthusiastically.

- Sally didn't know what to wear all, her clothes were torn and ratty.
- *Correction:* Sally didn't know what to wear**;** all her clothes were torn and ratty.

**Dashes**: Dashes are used to set off an additional thought in your sentence. This additional thought doesn't need to be an independent clause or complete thought at all. It can be a list, a clarification, a shift, an amplification--just some clause you wish to tack on to your sentence.

- They decided to meet once again at the beach. But at midnight!
- *Correction:* They decided to meet once again at the beach--but at midnight!

- At night they walked along the beach, looking up at the stars. A completely romantic evening for Sally.
- *Correction:* At night they walked along the beach, looking up at the stars--a completely romantic evening for Sally.

*Note that a dash is two hyphens: --, not one. MS Word usually combines these two hyphens into one long hyphen automatically, which is fine.

*For print mediums, do not put spaces around dashes. If you do, put spaces around both sides of the dash.

**Colons**: Use a colon for three main reasons: (1) to introduce a list, (2) to introduce a quotation, or (3) to set up a second clause that answers the first. The one main rule with colons is that an independent clause must precede the colon.

- They looked up at the constellations and could see a multitude of different patterns Orion, the Big Dipper, Cassiopia, and the Bear.
- *Correction:* They looked up at the constellations and could see a multitude of different patterns**:** Orion, the Big Dipper, Cassiopia, and the Bear.

- When Frank was confident he had Sally's respect, he asked her a big question "Will you marry me?"
- *Correction:* Frank was confident he had Sally's respect, he asked her a big question**:** "Will you marry me?"

- Sally answered briefly and softly: "Love is like an ocean wave. It rolls into shore from seemingly nowhere."
- *Correction:* Sally answered briefly and softly: "Love is like an ocean wave**:** it rolls into shore from seemingly nowhere."